Saskatchewan
Agriculture
and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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NATURAL VALLEY FARMS OPENS NEW SLAUGHTERING PLANT IN NEUDORF

Natural Valley Farms is certainly a bright light in Saskatchewan's beef processing sector. As the producer-owned company gets ready to open its slaughtering plant in Neudorf, General Manager Eric Kasko reflects on the journey thus far.

"Our processing plant has been in operation one year now, and we are processing 500 carcasses per week. It is a true value chain, when you consider that Natural Valley belongs to producers from Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta – the majority of them being Saskatchewan. In total there are about 200 family farms involved. The head office of the company is located in the processing facility in Wolseley."

Kasko makes no bones about the difficulties he faced in getting the eagerly anticipated slaughter plant opened on time.

"We have had numerous delays, given the worldwide shortage of steel, but our contractor did a fantastic job getting the crews moving when the steel finally arrived. We are on track now with the final piece of the building puzzle in place."

When the slaughtering plant becomes fully operational, Natural Valley will become a self-contained entity.

"We will then close the link between the slaughter and processing side. The slaughter plant is capable of processing 125,000 head per year. We will begin with half of that figure as our immediate goal is to ramp up to roughly 1250 head a week. There are huge opportunities opening up for our naturally raised beef, globally."

Kasko and his colleagues favour a slow and steady move into the marketplace.

Over this past year, many Saskatchewan retailers, such as the Federated Co-ops and high-end restaurants, have been steady buyers of their product, and more than two-thirds of their beef is going to eastern retailers.

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Within the last three months, Natural Valley completed its first sale into the U.S., and is close to finalizing an Asian sale.

"We will soon do a major Natural Valley label launch to officially announce our presence in the marketplace," says Kasko. "To do this we have hired a specialized firm, MTD Trading from eastern Canada, to go international."

Beef producers are paid under a unique grid system rewarding them for quality and yield - a significant change compared to other packing houses, explains Klasko.

The rural economy around Wolseley and Neudorf has certainly benefited from these two new plants. Between the slaughtering and processing plants, almost 100 persons from the two communities will be employed.

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HAY SALVAGE ALLOWED A WEEK EARLIER THIS YEAR

Livestock producers looking to salvage hay along roadside rights-of-way will be able to cut hay on July 8 this year, after a change in policy at Saskatchewan Highways and Transportation, made in consultation with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF).

"Saskatchewan Highways and Transportation has a policy that allows roadside hay to be cut and harvested so that it can be salvaged each year," explains Nichole Andre, Preservation Standards Engineer. "Over the last few years, July 15 was established as the day on which anyone could cut roadside hay. Prior to July 15, only the adjacent property owners were allowed to cut roadside hay. That policy has changed, and now July 8 is the new date."

Dale Weisbrot, a Forage Development Specialist with SAF, feels this is a significant development for those in agriculture who have come to depend on this feed resource.

"This is important because folks who are in the business of trying to get feed from the ditch want to have good quality hay. It is better to cut and harvest hay in the growing stage, rather than well after the individual plants have matured, because then the quality goes down."

As one who works with forage producers, Weisbrot also wants to take the opportunity to remind people who salvage hay to keep in mind some common courtesies while doing so.

"It is good to remember to do the neighbourly thing and call the folks who are adjacent to the roadside right-of-way and become their designated hay cutter/harvester before the July 8 date."

As a last word of guidance, Weisbrot reminds producers that roadside hay must be cut at a uniform height, and that the bales must be at least eight metres away from the shoulder of the highway. All bales must be removed from the highway right-of-way by August 8.

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Saskatchewan Highways and Transportation is ultimately responsible for this policy. The decision to go with the earlier salvage date was made after discussions with SAF on this and other issues around rights-of-way and ditches, like mowing and weed control.

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2006 SASKATCHEWAN U-PICK LOCATIONS BROCHURE PUTS FRUIT ON THE MAP

It is like looking at Saskatchewan through a different lens, one that allows users to envision a summer afternoon spent with family and friends gathering fresh, juicy strawberries. The 2006 u-pick locations brochure, published by the Saskatchewan Fruit Growers Association (SFGA), is a useful resource for anyone longing for homegrown flavours.

"This brochure is a marketing tool for the u-pick fruit industry, which relies heavily on direct contact with the consumer. A map like this gives consumers all the options in terms of where they could pick," says Clarence Peters, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's Provincial Fruit Crops Specialist.

Peters estimates that there are probably about 2,000 fruit acres now in Saskatchewan, most of them producing saskatoons, but other fruit are emerging.

"Cherries are starting to be picked up now, and have the potential to grow into a fairly good-sized industry, but it'll be a few years before we start picking them on a large scale. Strawberries have stayed fairly even, and that is the basis for most of the u-pick operations. They constitute around 200 or 250 acres of the total grown acres."

Some growers will tell you that there is nothing quite like fruit grown in Saskatchewan, and Peters agrees with them.

"The conditions here in the northern latitudes bring cooler nights, so there is more sugar laid down. We tend to get a sweeter product; very high in colour; fairly dense; and not overly full of water."

Even though Peters' major role in the fruit sector is mostly focused on the development and promotion of the commercial fruit industry, he also acts in an advisory capacity in the field.

As the provincial specialist in fruit crops, Peters is the primary source for information ranging from industry development to production problems in the field. Because of his in-depth knowledge of the fruit industry, he is able to draw together the expertise of other SAF production and industry development specialists into a single, cohesive package for the fruit industry.

As such, he has met many of the province's fruit growers.

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"Fruit growers come from all walks of life. Most growers have an extensive farm background, but we have also had lawyers, politicians, right across the board. The larger growers do this full-time—for example, the Strawberry Ranch in Saskatoon is fairly large operation with probably around 70 acres—but a lot of the u-picks are fairly small and family-run. Some of the commercial operations are a lot larger, of course."

The first u-picks appeared in Saskatchewan in 1980.

"There were two operations established then," says Peters. "They saw the opportunity. Things have grown exponentially since, but the growth potential for the u-picks is fairly limited because of our population. On the commercial side with saskatoons as well as other fruit, however, the international potential is much greater, specifically in Europe and Asia.

"Even at the local level, we don't have many saskatoons available in our markets. There is a huge potential for a fresh/frozen market supplying the wholesale/retail trade with fresh fruit in season and frozen fruit year-round. Fruit remain a sector of agriculture with a lot of potential. We haven't even begun to think about all the fruit we could grow."

Peters is convinced that the possibilities around fruit in the province are still virtually untapped.

"One of the potential new crops is the blue honeysuckle. The University of Saskatchewan is working on this right now. There are good markets for it in Japan, where they are very short of acreage to grow this blueberry-flavoured fruit. They come very early in the season, in mid-June, so they are ready much before all the other fruit come in. They are oblong in shape, a little longer than the blueberry. We are currently looking to develop larger fruit.

"The sea buckthorn is another fruit with good potential. We haven't figured out how we are going to harvest it yet, because people are not prepared to harvest it by hand. It is very spiny—we are trying to get spineless plants and plants with fruit that come off the stem more easily. Once that bridge is crossed, we will end up with a very intensely flavoured fruit, with very good nutrition. It is bright orange in colour; the fruit is very tightly clustered on the stem; very adaptable to this province, and hardy to about -60°C. Plus, it doesn't mind dry soil. It originally comes from Europe and Asia, where there could also be substantial markets."

Peters also mentions the black current as a possible fruit crop, mostly for the European market. It is something our neighbours in Alberta are already looking at. Lastly, he mentions raspberries as crop worthy of further processing.

This man sees no end to the opportunities for Saskatchewan fruit growers.

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UPCOMING FORAGE AND GRAZING FIELD TOUR IN SWIFT CURRENT

The Forage and Grazing Field Tour at the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Research Station (AAFC-SPARC) in Swift Current will be held on Wednesday June 28. True to form, the organizers—AAFC-SPARC, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, and the Southwest Research Station—are promising participants an unparalleled learning opportunity.

The tours are staged roughly every two years at the AAFC-SPARC Research Station, explains Trevor Lennox, a Forage Development Specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, and one of the organizers. While the program is still being developed, organizers have confirmed that registration will start at 9:30 a.m. and that the fee will be $5.00, which includes lunch.

"The purpose of the tour is to profile some of the local research," says Lennox. "We will be seeing an intensive legume grazing study where legumes are grazed by beef cattle. It will compare their grazing on sainfoin versus a mixture of hybrid meadow brome called AC Knowles and Spredor-4 alfalfa. It is looking at production data, as well as at the greenhouse gas side of it... measuring the methane released by the grazing animals."

Another featured stop will be a crested wheatgrass preference study.

"There will be livestock grazing different varieties of crested wheatgrass so we can see which is the preferred variety," explains Lennox. "There will be some newer varieties to compare, like AC Goliath and AC Parkland, and some older varieties like Kirk and Fairway.

"We are also looking at a native grasses establishment study. We'll be looking at stands that were established in 2001 with either a simple mix or a complex mix. The complex mix has 14 species in it and the simple mix has seven species in it. We will look at how the different stands have progressed."

In addition, production data on forage yield and animal gain have been gathered as part of this project, Lennox points out.

"In recent years, they have also looked at the effect of rotational deferred grazing management on these stands. They will look at how grazing is a factor in the way these stands evolve with time. Also, we recently seeded another native project involving seeding a native grass mix in combination with various legumes in an effort to add a legume component to a native grass stand."

(more)

Another stop will involve looking at AC Saltlander, which is a new grass adapted to more saline soils.

"We'll also be looking at another grass called Intermediate Wheatgrass, and another called Pubescent Wheatgrass. These are newer stands. We will be assessing the establishment of these two wheatgrasses and AC Saltlander. Establishment is always an issue from a producer's point of view."

Another stop will feature annual forages. Participants will compare common annual forages, such as barley and oats, to millet.

"We are just trying to look at the differences between forage types. At another stop, we will be looking at the difference between warm-season and cool-season perennial forages."

The day will also feature trade booths and sponsors.

"That is why we can offer a meal for $5.00," quips Lennox. "The day will wind up at about 5:00 p.m. People must pre-register because space fills up quickly. We get between 80 and 100 participants, usually. We have vans, and, depending on how many people attend, we may ask people to car-pool also."

To pre-register, call the SAF Swift Current Agriculture Business Centre at (306) 778-8285.

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FIRST NATIONS AGRICULTURAL SYMPOSIUM TO TAKE PLACE IN SASKATOON

It is an agricultural operator segment that has the potential to significantly influence the face of Saskatchewan agriculture. First Nations bands and entrepreneurs are emerging as farmers, ranchers and agribusiness operators. To effectively tap into increasing opportunities, the First Nations Agricultural Council of Saskatchewan Inc. (FNACS) is holding its first annual agriculture symposium in Saskatoon on June 27 and 28.

The symposium is held in conjunction with the University of Saskatchewan's College of Agriculture Indigenous Development Conference. Its theme is "Building Futures with Mother Earth: Indigenous Development", and will feature panel discussions with international guest speakers, along with over a dozen exhibitors varying from financial institutions, agricultural organizations/companies, First Nation businesses, education institutions and evening entertainment.

"The conference will bring in people from Arizona and New Zealand, as well as from the University of Saskatchewan, and it will look at different methods of agricultural development on First Nations land," says Usne Butt, Manager of Agriculture and Environment at FNACS. "I am hoping it will bring out some ideas for new ways to implement some of this development in our own programs.

"Under the Treaty Land Entitlement process and through the honour acres system, First Nations bands are acquiring huge tracks of land. In recent times, agriculture has not really been perceived as viable. People are leaving farming, and what has happened is that land owned by First Nations is now being left fallow. It is an opportune time for First Nations to take it over and manage it on their own."

FNACS was established in 2004 as a non-profit organization to develop a strong, viable and sustainable agricultural sector, both on and off reserve, for status Indians in Saskatchewan. Through the guidance and feedback of Saskatchewan First Nation's farmers, ranchers, chiefs and councils, FNACS has developed a vision and plan to ensure the participation of First Nations in agriculture.

"We are tackling this in different ways—using education to teach people how to manage the land and develop it for agricultural use in a sustainable manner," explains Butt. "By bringing in fresh ideas and new perspectives, we have an opportunity to learn from success stories in other areas.

"The Arizona and New Zealand models are very different models of agriculture than here, but my understanding is that some of them have engendered very successful agricultural developments, and, ideally, we will apply those models here in a way that works with our people."

Butt, himself, is a status Indian, originally from Saddle Lake, Alberta. He has a Master's degree in biology, and wouldn't trade his place for the world because of the resource potential he sees all around him.

"I love getting out on the land and seeing some of these reserves and some of these beautiful pieces of real estate in this province. People don't really appreciate what is here, so from that sense, I am quite happy. From a strategic point of view, this symposium is really opportune. I think our organization is in a good position to assist in different aspects of development from a strategic business planning, sustainability and training point of view. What we are attempting to do is very ambitious, but we are really starting to see results."

The symposium and conference will take place at the Saskatoon Inn.

For more information, contact the First Nations Agricultural Council of Saskatchewan at 306-978-8872 or www.fnacs.ca .

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